

Navigating Epistemological Territories

Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon
Bowling Green State University

INTRODUCTION

Montessorians often tell stories when they introduce concepts and theories, reminding children that these are just tools and that the tools are human made and therefore fallible. Montessorians teach concepts such as wind, ocean currents, and how these affect weather patterns through the use of "Imaginary Islands" the children create. As a Montessori teacher I taught children how to draw an island with all of its coastal features as a way of learning what a cape, bay, etc. is. The children then decided where they wanted to locate their island on the globe, teaching them how to read and draw longitude and latitude lines over their own island sketch so that anyone could know where the island was located. In teaching longitude and latitude lines, one has to remind children that these lines do not exist in the world. One cannot drive across America and bump into longitude and latitude lines. It may seem silly, but children will look for those lines unless you tell them *not* to. Longitude and latitude lines are tools -- useful because they work, but not real. If one measures the distance from the top of the world to the bottom, one finds a point in the middle which we have labeled the "equator." What we call it, how we "mark" it, what meaning we attach to such a point, or even that we "have knowledge" of the equator depends a great deal on our social context.

Longitude/latitude lines are a grid we place over the world to help us find our way. Many people who use other tools like the stars or unusual landmarks to navigate their way across territories, are not aware of the idea of longitude/latitude lines, or, even if aware, do not find them a useful tool to use. Adults may not need reminding that longitude/latitude lines do not really exist, but they do tend to forget that the world we know as "reality" is something we have socially constructed. Skills like critical thinking are also tools to help us in our construction of knowledge, just as longitude/latitude lines and compasses help us navigate across territories. They are tools created and developed by us and, therefore, subject to mistakes and flaws. We continually rework, readapt, remake these tools, and reconstruct these stories; I wish to do the same with the story of epistemology.

In the seminal work by Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*,¹ the authors set out to redefine the branch of sociology known as "sociology of knowledge." They begin their treatise by noting they are not claiming to answer the philosophical question: How is one to know? The sociologist is forced to use quotation marks around "reality" and "knowledge." Sociologists cannot differentiate between valid and invalid assertions about the world, as a philosopher "is driven to decide" (SCR, p. 2). In Berger and Luckmann's description of how "reality" is socially constructed, one realizes that philosophers have the role in societies of being "full-time personnel for universe-maintaining legitimation"; what philosophers legitimate are the symbolic universes humans have produced (SCR, p. 118).

First, people socially construct what they label to be "reality" and then they experience the world that way. It is as if a grid is constructed by people to help people navigate their way, and then their children see and experience their world through that grid. People give meaning to what they experience through language as a way of constructing reality. Then they use conversation to pass on the meanings (the grid) to their children. Children internalize their parents' socially constructed reality through the language they learn. "The child does not internalize the world of [his/her]

significant others as one of many possible worlds. [He/she] internalizes it as *the* world, the only existent and only conceivable world, the world *tout court*" (SCR, p. 134).

After the grid is constructed, philosophers (theologians, scientists, etc.) come along and develop stories (theories) to legitimize the grid; in so doing, philosophers help to maintain its existence. Philosophers "set the limits of what is relevant in terms of social interaction" (SCR, p. 102). "[T]he symbolic universe is theoretical" and "it is self-maintaining, that is, self-legitimizing by the sheer facticity of its objective existence in the society in question" (SCR, p. 104-105). Berger and Luckmann's central claim is: "What remains sociologically essential is the recognition that all symbolic universes and all legitimations are human products; their existence has its base in the lives of concrete individuals, and has no empirical status apart from these lives" (SCR, p. 128).

I believe Berger and Luckmann are accurate in their claim that what human beings consider to be "reality" is socially constructed. Work by feminist researchers and anthropologists would certainly support this claim.² But I also believe this claim needs to be extended to the areas of study of reality Berger and Luckmann distinguish as "sociology of knowledge" and "epistemology." This paper is a suggestion that what philosophers consider to be "epistemology" is too narrowly defined. As it has been defined, it is vulnerable to accusations of essentialism which, in a world of fallibility and pluralism, makes the field of epistemology a dinosaur. I also wish to suggest that traditional epistemologists overestimate their abilities and their tasks.

I wish to try to open up epistemology as it has been traditionally defined and broaden the concept's options. I am motivated by a belief that epistemology has a very strong connection to education, for epistemological theories investigate the nature and origin of knowledge. Epistemological theories concerning the nature of knowledge affect how people try to pass on knowledge in the form of teaching. I look closely at epistemology with the overall concern of education in mind.

I will begin with Burbules and Siegel's 1991 discussion before the Philosophy of Education Society, in order to raise questions concerning the socially constructed idea of epistemology. I will offer an alternative view as the paper proceeds, one which I have labeled a "social feminist epistemology" for reasons that will become self-evident.

TRADITIONAL EPISTEMOLOGIES

Epistemology, as traditionally defined, looks at questions about the *justification* of beliefs, not at how we come to believe certain things (those questions are for sociologists and psychologists). Philosophy is concerned with the normative status of knowledge claims and about what warrants those claims (what warrants claims is evidence); psychology and sociology are concerned with causal questions concerning how beliefs are developed. Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that considers theories concerning knowledge -- truth being a necessary condition for knowledge. One cannot know something that is false; such knowledge would not be classified as knowledge, but rather as a belief. Beliefs are not necessarily true. Mere beliefs, or right opinions, are stated as "S believes that p," "S" being the subject and "p" being the object of the proposition. Rational beliefs are ones that are supported by good reasons ("S has good reason to believe that p"). "S knows that p" means S has evidence for the truth of p, S believes that p, and that p is true.³

Underlying problems for traditional epistemologies are the assumptions that:

- (1) knowledge, properly labelled, is autonomous in that it is of no epistemological significance whose knowledge it is; (2) knowledge acquisition may be of psychological interest, but it is irrelevant to an epistemologist's quest for criteria of justification, validity, and verification; and (3) knowledge is objective in the sense that discussion of the character and epistemic circumstances of subjects has nothing to contribute to the proper epistemological task of assessing the product.⁴

Traditional epistemological theories *believe* knowers are autonomous, rather than acknowledging, as I am suggesting, that individual knowers are developed out of a community of other knowers and

are affected by their environment and the people that surround them. Traditional epistemological theories *assume* that criteria for warranting knowledge claims can be found without having to consider the way human beings know. To attempt to look at knowledge claims, separate from any examination of how those claims were derived, is to make a serious mistake.

[A] theory of knowledge that lacks a reasonable understanding of how human beings can and do acquire and add to knowledge must be of dubious relevance. Sound psychological insights form an invaluable, sine qua non basis for any theory of knowledge that purports to explicate the way human beings know.⁵

Traditional epistemologists *believe* that epistemology should be removed from the practical-political issues a feminist epistemology must address. Knowledge is affected by the people who are doing its constructing and their circumstances. Such "theories that transcend the specificities of gendered and otherwise situated subjectivities are impotent to come to terms with the politics of knowledge."⁶

Also underlying traditional epistemologies is the assumption that being can be separated from knowing -- that ontology can be separated from epistemology. This separation (part of the grid we, in the Western world, have adopted) separates knowers from knowledge/ideas. It treats knowledge as if it has a life of its own. This seems to me to be a central problem. "In philosophy, being (ontology) has been divorced from knowing (epistemology) and both have been separated from either ethics or politics."⁷ Though traditional philosophers like to think of themselves as neutral, objective seekers of truth, their values, and therefore biases, can be found in how they have defined what questions are worth considering, what methods for addressing those questions are considered valid, and what ideas and solutions are sound.⁸ Like Jane Flax: "I assume here that knowledge is the product of human beings. Thinking is a form of human activity which cannot be treated in isolation from other forms of human activity including the forms of human activity which, in turn, shape the humans who think. Consequently, philosophies will inevitably bear the imprint of the social relations out of which they and their creators arose."⁹

Gregory Bateson, as a naturalist, effectively described the problem this way:

In the natural history of living human being, ontology and epistemology cannot be separated. [One's] (commonly unconscious) beliefs about what sort of world it is will determine how [one] sees it and acts within it, and [one's] ways of perceiving and acting will determine [one's] beliefs about its nature. The living [human] is thus bound within a net of epistemological and ontological premises which -- regardless of ultimate truth or falsity -- becomes partially self-validating for [him/her].¹⁰

A closer look at the 1991 discussion by Burbules and Siegel will help clarify a traditional definition of epistemology.¹¹ I begin with Siegel's position because it is clearly an absolutist one, while Burbules embraces a more contextual view -- a factor important to the expanded epistemology I propose.

HARVEY SIEGEL'S RATIONALITY

In the discussion, Burbules complemented Siegel for moving epistemology away from vulgar absolutism to an absolutism that is less dogmatic -- one that opens the door to fallibilism and pluralism. Siegel says that "[c]ontemporary epistemologists -- absolutists and relativists alike -- reject certainty, dogmatism, and all the other features of vulgar absolutism" (RR, p. 164). The sort of absolutism he recommends is a "non-dogmatic, non-certain, corrigible, fallible, non-unique absolutism" (RR, p. 164).

Burbules puzzles, isn't this a strange meaning for "absolute?" (PES, p. 217).

For Siegel, "*absolutism is a necessary precondition of epistemological inquiry*" (RR, p. 165, my italics). What is absolute about a "non-dogmatic, non-certain, corrigible, fallible, non-unique absolutism" is "the possibility of objective, non-question begging evaluation of putative knowledge claims, in terms of criteria which admit of criticism and improvement" (RR, p. 162).

For Siegel, a "relativist must regard epistemological debate as pointless, insofar as there is, for the relativist, no possibility of genuinely answering central epistemological questions" (RR, p. 165). The relativist "gives up the absolutist conception of rightness" and therefore

cannot assert that foundationalism (non-foundationalism), correspondence (coherence) theories of truth or justification, causal (reliabilist, defeasibility, etc.) theories of knowledge or the like are non-relatively right. *But genuine epistemological debate does have as its aim the determination of the non-relatively right answers to these questions* (RR, p. 166, my italics).

While Siegel goes to great length in *Relativism Refuted* to distinguish absolutism from "vulgar absolutism," he is not so gracious with relativism. Traditional epistemological orientations have been labeled by feminists such as Lorraine Code as "the view from nowhere." Code here had in mind Donna Haraway's astute observation: "Relativism is a way of being nowhere and claiming to be everywhere" but "absolutism is a way of being everywhere while pretending to be nowhere."¹² If one embraces fallibilism, in the end one must embrace relativism. Not a vulgar relativism, "the view from nowhere," but one that is qualified by whatever criteria people can socially construct. A qualified relativist, such as Burbules, Code, or myself, grounds her claims "in experiences and practices, in the efficacy of dialogical negotiation and of action."¹³

NICHOLAS C. BURBULES'S REASONABLENESS

Burbules, in his effort to avoid dogmatism, embraces a substantive conception of rationality, which he labels "reasonableness" (PES, p. 218). "I want to incorporate into the very idea of reason the elements of personal characteristics, context, and social relations that support and motivate reasonable thought and conduct. That is, to be reasonable means to be a certain kind of person, in a certain kind of situation, related to certain kinds of other people" (PES, p. 218).

While Siegel agrees with the need to reject a formal conception of rationality, and to "regard rationality as a substantive epistemic notion, involving the contents of sentences rationally related" (PES, p. 228), he has problems with Burbules's notion of "reasonableness," believing that "he overstates the contextual dimensions of rationality" (PES, p. 228). If rationality is determined by "the actual activities, decisions, and judgments which people make, then I see a big problem: namely, there is no room on this view for actual activities, decisions, and judgments to be irrational, for there is no role for criteria to function in assessing specific activities, decisions, and judgments as rational (or not)" (PES, p. 229). Burbules suggests "that rationality itself is determined by context, in the sense that what "rationality" means, and whether and why it is valued, themselves are determined by context" (PES, p. 229).

Translated into my way of speaking, it appears that Burbules is acknowledging that theories, such as rationality, are ones that people construct, whereas Siegel wishes to argue that "rationality" (as a concept) is dependent on the idea of "absolutism," and "absolutism" is dependent on a criteria of "rightness" which must be objective and nonrelative -- not socially constructed. Yet, Siegel has agreed that the criteria used to judge rival claims must be subject to critical assessment and improvement. He says he is not claiming that philosophers have a "God's eye view of truth" or have found an Archimedian point. If the presently accepted criteria (the absolutist's belief system) can be critically assessed, Siegel suggests the criteria can be self-correcting and corrigible.

Principles embody rationality and define and assess reasons in a tradition at a time. As the tradition evolves, so do the principles which define and assess reasons. So what may count as good reason in a tradition may change over time; today's compelling reason may be seen as less compelling tomorrow... Still, the principles which determine the compellingness of reasons at a time apply to all putative reasons impartially and universally... [T]he principles which define reasons and determine their force may change, but rationality remains the same (ER, p. 134-35, from RR/ER , p. 251).

But, if one embraces fallibilism and pluralism, one has to admit that the criteria as presently accepted, could be wrong *right now*. A qualified relativist position, such as the one I am proposing,

says that, given the presently accepted criteria, this is the best judgment I can make, but I am aware that my criteria may be limited, and I could be wrong. Although this statement seems to be exactly what Siegel is saying with his definition of "absolute," as cited above, it really is not, as Siegel believes he can say even more. Here is where I think traditional epistemologists overestimate their abilities and tasks. I believe fallibilism and pluralism are theories that admit to the social construction of reality. Siegel does not agree with me. While he admits that what he believes, right now, might be wrong, he says that does not show that he *is* wrong, right now. If not, Siegel says, then what he believes is true: *absolutely* true. And his reasons can also be absolute, as he has defined "absolute."¹⁴ Whereas Siegel's point is, "I am right, absolutely, until proven wrong," I am saying, "I am right, qualified by a socially constructed view of knowledge, so I know I could be wrong."

Siegel criticizes Burbules (and me) for the way we navigate the epistemological territories; we do not use epistemology as it has been traditionally defined, nor do we address questions and concerns that traditional epistemologists have determined are legitimate. What Siegel forgets is that how "epistemology" has been defined is, itself, not a given, and that it ought to be possible to question the value of the meaning and tasks assigned to such a concept. Just because philosophers, as the legitimizers of a symbolic universe, have aligned the epistemological grid to look a certain way does not mean that way is the only way or the right way. In fact, there are as many ways as there are possible societies.

As Siegel and other traditional philosophers have defined epistemology, *the concept of absolutism is built right into the definition of what epistemology is*. They say people must have something absolute that they can appeal to or they can not claim to know what is right. Unfortunately, or fortunately (depending on one's view), in the end, the criteria used to support theories are fallible themselves and that must be admitted. I cannot offer truth claims that are absolute any more than Siegel or Burbules can. I can offer a new theory to try to explain how it is we know, argue and debate with my society (Philosophy of Education) as to why I think my description of reality is more inclusive or beneficial than others presented previously. That is all any of us can do. Siegel and traditional epistemologists argue for the value of absolutism because it offers people the opportunity to judge what is right; Burbules and others, like myself, push for the inclusion of context because it forces people to open the door towards acknowledging they could be wrong -- that "right" is judged from a social perspective.

A SOCIAL FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY

Whereas some feminists, such as Code, conclude there can be no feminist epistemology given the present definition of epistemology, I choose to try to broaden the definition. I choose to attempt to navigate epistemological territories, and the only tools I have available to me are the same ones that are available to anyone else, for example, my ability to reason and think critically, my intuition, my relational skills and communication skills, my emotions and feelings, and the fact that these are questions I care enough about to pursue. As with any other philosopher, all I can ever hope to do is "attempt to describe how understanding is possible in particular contexts; [philosophy] cannot create a universalizing theory of knowledge (an epistemology [as traditionally defined]) that can ground and account for all knowledge or test all truth claims because these are necessarily context dependent."¹⁵

I am working on an alternative epistemological theory I have labeled a "relational epistemology."¹⁶ In this limited space, all I can do is point to it. While I cannot claim to offer the best, truest, or most original epistemological theory, I am trying to offer one that is more open and inclusive as it attempts to be self-conscious, reflective, adjustable and adaptable as people gain further in understanding. My hope is that a theory of knowledge that begins with an understanding that theories are ideas -- stories which are socially constructed and, therefore, fallible and subject to change -- should be one that is less open to ideological abuse. Women and men from different ethnic backgrounds and ways of life should find this theory applies to them.

A relational epistemology begins with the assumption that all people are social beings who are "embedded and embodied."¹⁷ The second assumption is that knowledge is something that people contribute to: they do not find knowledge "out there" or "in here." These assumptions are what make my theory a social theory. As people share experiences and develop ideas and understandings about what those experiences mean, they begin to construct knowledge. *A relational epistemology views knowledge as something that is socially constructed by embedded, embodied people who are in relation with each other.*

Unlike traditional epistemologies, a relational epistemology considers being as directly connected to knowing. Because such an approach to epistemology highlights the interactive connection between social beings and ideas, it is necessary to look at the kind of relationships people experience and consider how they enhance the development of ideas and the constructing of knowledge. Ethical and political issues will need to be addressed in an epistemology that looks at knowledge created by people -- not just knowledge *per se* -- for the quality of the social relationships *people* have will affect the ideas being constructed/created, especially in terms of whether or not the ideas have the opportunity to be freely expressed.

I assume knowledge is constructed by human beings who are in relation with each other. These human beings were once very young children, and when they were born they were not born with a sense of self. Traditional epistemologies treat people, when they enter into the discussion, as if they are adults who never went through the process of being formed through relations with others. I assume people develop a sense of self through their relationships with others which are internalized and interact with people's own innate constitutions. I take early infantile experiences and child-rearing to be vital to the construction of knowledge.¹⁸

A feminist epistemology "asserts that knowledge is useful if it contributes to a practical reconsideration of the world in which women's interests are not subordinate to those of men."¹⁹ The writing of a relational epistemology is motivated by the desire to expand what epistemology means to include the qualities of knowing that have historically been viewed as detrimental or distracting to the obtaining of knowledge -- qualities such as feelings, emotions, and intuitions which are usually linked to women rather than men.

From a traditional perspective, such as Siegel's, much of this must be problematic. Siegel will criticize my views just as he criticized those of Burbules. But, please remember, theories are developed after "reality" has been socially constructed as ways of legitimizing and maintaining the view of reality being developed. The way to change social definitions of reality is through "concrete actions of human beings" (SCR, p. 115). The traditional view of epistemology, I have argued, limits the problems and questions that can be considered to a dangerously thin level. The assumption that one must accept the traditional definition of "epistemology" in order to be an epistemologist loses sight of the fact that epistemological theories are grids people place upon the world; like longitude and latitude lines, they do not really exist. They are stories people like philosophers make up to explain present experiences. As such, they are subject to change through action such as I am taking now. What I hope to have accomplished through this paper is to cause others to question what is meant by "epistemology."²⁰

1. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966). I will use SCR to symbolize this publication.

2. See, for example, work by Gregory Bateson, Carol Gilligan, Jean Grimshaw, Alison Jaggar, Sandra Harding, Elizabeth Minnich, and Margaret Mead.

3. Harvey Siegel points out that this way of discussing knowledge will be found in any introduction to epistemology text. My source for this description was John Hardwig, "Epistemic Dependence," *The Journal of Philosophy* 82, no. 7 (1985): 335-49, 336, and Siegel's direct correspondence to me.
4. Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, for Brown University Press, 1987), 25-26.
5. *Ibid.*, 32.
6. Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 315.
7. Jane Flax, "Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Epistemology and Metaphysics," in *Discovering Reality*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht, Boston, London: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983), 248. Flax offers Kant as an example in footnote 8.
8. See related quote by Alison M. Jaggar in "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry, Marilyn Pearsall (New York, London: Routledge, 1989, 1992), 155-56.
9. Flax, "Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious," 248.
10. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 314.
11. Nicholas C. Burbules, "Two Perspectives on Reason as an Educational Aim: The Virtues of Reasonableness" and Harvey Siegel, "Two Perspectives on Reason as an Educational Aim: The Rationality of Reasonableness," *Philosophy of Education 1991*, ed. Margret Buchmann, and Robert E. Floden (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992). I will use PES to symbolize this publication. Also used:

Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism* (Dordrecht & Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1987). I will use RR to symbolize this publication.

Nicholas C. Burbules, "Rationality and Reasonableness: A Discussion of Harvey Siegel's Relativism Refuted and Educating Reason," *Educational Theory* 41, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 235-52. I will use RR/ER to symbolize this publication.
12. Lorraine Code, "Taking Subjectivity into Account," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (N.Y. and London: Routledge, 1993), 40.
13. *Ibid.*, 39.
14. Siegel, through personal correspondence, August, 1994.
15. Flax, *Thinking Fragments*, 38. The bracketed words are mine.
16. See "The Nurturing of a Relational Epistemology," in review.
17. This is Seyla Benhabib's phrase used in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
18. I am not alone in drawing attention to the infant in discussions on epistemology. See the work of Seyla Benhabib, Jane Flax, Nel Noddings, and Sara Ruddick.
19. Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheid, 1983), 385.
20. I want to thank Andrea Boyea, Harvey Siegel, and Nick Burbules for their extensive comments on an earlier version of this paper.